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THE VALUE OF A MISTAKE

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The writer of the "Lost Motion" articles in the *English Journal* discourages emphasis on mistakes. There are many excellent things in these articles and I hesitate upon the threshold of any general criticism, but upon this point, at least, I must take issue with the writer. It seems that a thing so abundant as error should certainly be utilized. In the first place I wish to discuss a method of dealing with mistakes in composition, and in the second place I wish to show how the principle can be applied to literature.

The writer of the articles referred to deplores the use of "cabalistic" symbols in the margin of the paper to be corrected, and suggests, instead, that the teacher write opposite each mistake the pupil has made a complete sentence telling what is wrong and how to make the correction. The charge is made that the kind of criticism that employs symbols to indicate errors "says to a boy in effect, 'There's a mistake on your paper. Guess what it is and correct it, or fail.' Usually if he could guess, he would not have made the mistake."

In the first place, a teacher who has time to write a personal note to the pupil about each mistake he has made in his composition must have very few pupils, or very few themes, or papers that are remarkably free from error. Furthermore, the method is wrong in principle inasmuch as it tends to destroy the exercise of initiative on the part of the pupil. The pupil who continually has things done for him will never learn to do for himself. Such a method, it seems to me, is a most apt illustration of "lost motion." Some pupils, of course, will make progress under the method, but they are the pupils who would make progress under any method, refusing to be handicapped by the teacher's shortcomings; but the others, the great majority, will stagnate and grow mentally flabby and dependent. The finding and correcting of mistakes is a kind of

game which the normal boy or girl likes to play. So why not use a set of convenient symbols which will indicate the *nature* or *character* of the various mistakes, thus leaving the pupil an opportunity to discover the exact location of the error and a method of correction, for himself? It is not guess work any more than is the use of algebraic or geometric symbols in mathematics guess work. Any pupil who possesses intelligence enough to be in high school can learn a few mechanical symbols like *O* for "omit," *G* for "grammar," *A* for "ambiguous."

The foregoing quotation also contained the statement that if the pupil had known (or if he could guess) what the mistake was he would not have made it in the first place. This statement is very complimentary to the pupil's intelligence, but my experience with pupils and papers does not bear it out. Results of certain careful investigations which I have made show that over half the mistakes which pupils, beyond the Freshman year, in high school make are mistakes which *they know better than to make*. They are mistakes which are due to carelessness, thoughtlessness, laziness, and the force of bad English habit. So it seems to me that as a rule the teacher should merely point out the nature of the pupil's mistake and then let the pupil himself put into practice the rules of grammar, writing, spelling, etc., which he has "gone over" time and time again in his school course.

Or better still, let some of the careful, painstaking pupils in class take the papers and indicate the errors, thereby showing the pupil that his mistakes are so patent and evident that it does not take a *teacher* to discover them. This method of theme correction by pupils acts as a spur to both backward and brilliant. It creates keener competition. The poor pupils desire to make a better showing in the eyes of their classmates and the good pupils consider it a "reward of merit" to be called upon to "help the teacher." Furthermore, after the method is thoroughly under way, the teacher is relieved of at least 50 per cent of the drudgery connected with the teaching of composition.

This brings me to a second statement made in the article already referred to, a statement which I wish particularly to consider, namely, that the pupil derives little or no benefit from his finding

and correcting other people's mistakes. "No learner gets far on his way if he devotes his time to the contemplation and attempted correction of the mistakes of other people," says the lamenter of "lost motion." There is the semblance of a truth back of the statement, for the ultimate purpose of study is *self*-correction. But one of the oldest and truest principles of life is that we learn through the mistakes of others. It is true in history; it is true in English composition. Looking for the mistakes in sentences calls for keenness and alertness. The pupil soon learns that others besides himself are prone to make mistakes, and he learns not to be discouraged before an array of marks upon his own paper. Furthermore, a careful search for mistakes in papers of other pupils is one of the best methods of impressing grammatical and rhetorical principles. We are all familiar with the oft-repeated statement that a person learns more the first year he teaches than he learned in all his schools days before. While this statement is not literally true, it is very suggestive of a true principle of learning. A position of responsibility calling for critical judgment demands accurate and definite knowledge. Then why not give the pupil a responsible position demanding critical judgment? His response will be the same as that of the teacher: an effort to make his knowledge more complete and definite so that he may apply it to the work which has been assigned him. It is a well-known fact that proofreading affords valuable training in habits of accuracy and carefulness. Theme correction by pupils, which is a kind of proofreading, will serve the same purpose.

This same principle applies in the teaching of literature and ethics. Even in the moral world the "don't's" cannot be entirely eliminated. No instruction can be exclusively positive. The imitation of success demands the avoidance of failure. The appreciation of the good in a story or poem cannot be dissociated from the recognition of the bad. The pupil's critical judgment and powers of discrimination must be developed and it is not to be done through either positive or negative emphasis alone (though the positive may stand first and most important), but by the pointing out of weakness and error together with the study of the excellent qualities of writing. When, we as teachers, hold up every classic in our course

as ideal we are unfair to ourselves, to the pupils, and to the author; for, in some cases, we "appreciate" merely from a sense of duty, we deliberately build up a misconception in the mind of the pupil, and we apotheosize an author who was only a fallible mortal like the rest of us. Why not freely admit to the pupil that certain lines in the "Ancient Mariner" and in "Christabel," for example, are in some respects inferior? Why (when half our teachers deplore the necessity of teaching a thing so "fearfully and wonderfully made")—why whisper in hushed accents that *Burke's Speech on Conciliation* is the acme of argumentative skill and that the appreciation of it is the test of a logical mind? In the first place there is some doubt as to the truth of the statement, and in the second place it is a very discouraging thing to say to a high-school pupil.

For these reasons, I contend that mistakes have their uses. Practice in the detection of mistakes in composition contributes to the development of initiative and critical judgment and the habit of carefulness; and the pointing out of weaknesses in inferior passages in stories, poems, or essays to be studied by the class leads to the habit of discrimination on the part of the pupil and a more nearly honest evaluation of literature. This might well have been called "A Lost Notion in the Teaching of English," since one of the oldest principles of life is to profit by the mistakes of others. Undoubtedly mistakes may be made to do service. Properly utilized, every error has its value.